

Southwest Virginia Hair Sheep Industry Makes Major Advance (April 19, 2006)

Glade Spring, Virginia

Three years ago I was introduced to a highly promising new opportunity for significant growth in Southwest Virginia's agriculture economy.

In the fall of 2003, I was invited to meet with the organizers of the Scott County Hair Sheep Association on the farm of Martha Mewbourne in Nickelsville, and at that meeting I was impressed with the tremendous opportunity hair sheep production offered to farmers in our region. At that time, the Association comprised 50 members and had a sheep inventory on local farms valued at

\$250,000. On behalf of her Association, Martha Mewbourne requested my assistance in identifying a retail market for the high quality lamb products produced from hair sheep, including lamb chops, rack of lamb and leg of lamb.

Following that meeting, I contacted my friend Steve Smith, the CEO of Food City, a highly successful Southwest Virginia based grocery retailer, to encourage his interest in marketing hair sheep lamb products through the Food City Network of more than 100 retail stores. Following that meeting and a series of discussions between Food City and the Scott County Hair Sheep Association, in February of 2004 Food City entered into an agreement with the Hair Sheep Association to offer fresh locally grown lamb in its stores in the region.

Based upon an initial highly successful sale of lamb products in selected Food City stores neighboring Kingsport, Tennessee, Food City has now announced its intention to purchase at least 200 lambs per week, more than

10,000 lambs annually, to provide fresh, locally grown lamb throughout its retail network.

Based upon Food City's commitment for this large annual purchase, the number of hair sheep producers in our region has now grown to more than 200 members. Sales from the Association to Food City more than doubled during the first year, but the potential for growth in the Hair Sheep Industry is large. The 200 existing producers are not able to provide Food City with a total of 10,000 lambs. Accordingly, within the Food City demand for lamb products alone there is substantial room for growth in the number of hair sheep producers in our region. It is noteworthy that the sale of 10,000 lambs annually to Food City would have the potential of producing approximately \$1 million dollars per year in profit for farming families locally. Obviously, our region has a large interest in assuring that this retail demand for lamb products is met.

In addition to introducing the Scott County Hair Sheep Association to Food City and the partnership which has resulted from that introduction, my staff and I have taken a number of steps to expand hair sheep production in our region. My office has hosted several conferences to which all Southwest Virginia farmers have been invited to explain the economic

benefits of hair sheep production, to describe the market which exists at the retail level for hair sheep lamb, to describe techniques utilized in the raising and care of hair sheep and to describe the process by which local farmers can become members of the Scott County Hair Sheep Association for the effective marketing of their lamb.

I have also encouraged Virginia Tech through its extension office and its research arm to become knowledgeable about and involved in the hair sheep industry, and I have been gratified by the response Virginia Tech has made. Today, I am pleased to join with Sharon Quisenberry, Dean of the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at Virginia Tech, in announcing a major step forward in Virginia Tech's commitment to our growing local hair sheep industry. We are meeting this morning at the Southwest Virginia Agricultural Research and Extension Center in Glade Spring which for many years has been maintained by Virginia Tech as a location for agriculturally related research.

This morning we are announcing that a broad new focus of this center will be research related to the hair sheep industry.

Specifically, this center will establish a flock of 200 breeding hair sheep ewes. The ewes and their offspring will be carefully observed so that data can be collected in areas such as parasite resistance, rate of weight gain, longevity, growth characteristics, the results of various feed alternatives, including grass and grain finishes and the evaluations of various genetics characteristics of hair sheep.

The goal of the research will be to provide farmers in our region with the most complete information available in the nation on many characteristics of hair sheep which will lead to the highest possible meat quality and methods of improving the breed. It has generally been observed that hair sheep thrive well in Southwest Virginia's climate and terrain. In fact, they appear to be better acclimated than our wool sheep. I would also note from my personal observation that the lamb from hair sheep is of excellent quality, and I am certainly not surprised by the tremendous demand for this product in retail store. The research which is conducted at this center will ensure that lamb of consistently high quality is produced in the most cost effective manner, and I broadly welcome this research initiative and thank Virginia Tech for taking this important step to boost a highly promising new Southwest Virginia agricultural industry.

I am confident that with the help of Virginia Tech and the excellent work of the Scott County Hair Sheep Association, Southwest Virginia will soon become known as the "Hair Sheep Capitol" of the nation. I want to recognize and thank Sharon Quisenberry, Dean of the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at Virginia Tech, for her vision in understanding the promise the Hair Sheep Industry holds for the agriculture community of our region and for her interest in assisting with the growth and prosperity of that industry. Dean Quisenberry will shortly explain in greater detail the work to be done at the Glade Spring research center.

At the conclusion of her remarks, we will welcome to the podium Steve Smith, the CEO of Food City, whose commitment to providing the best possible products for his customers, locally grown whenever possible, has helped to create the opportunity for farmers in our region which will be further enhanced by the work performed at this center.

And following Steve's remarks we will hear from David Redwine and Martha Mewbourne, Co-Founders of the Scott County Hair Sheep Association. I want to thank them for their key role in success of their industry to date and congratulate them upon the tremendous growth which their Association is experiencing.

At this time I am pleased to welcome to the podium Sharon Quisenberry.